

**Improving Fire Protection in San Diego
Council President Scott Peters, First District
For the La Jolla Village News, February 2008**

The wildfires of 2003 and 2007 exposed weaknesses in San Diego's fire protection and response strategies. Although Southern California will always live with the threat of catastrophic wildfire, there is more our city can do to prepare for this threat and to respond quickly and forcefully to fires.

In the wake of the 2003 fires, the City Council requested a comprehensive Public Safety Needs Assessment, to identify and quantify the needs of our police and fire-rescue departments. That report projected the expenses of San Diego's public safety agencies to be \$478 million over four years, with approximately \$159 identified for Fire-Rescue. Eight categories of need were identified: personnel, communications, information technology, supplies and services, equipment, fleet, facilities and emergency preparedness/homeland security. The report by the city manager stated that additional revenue increases were required to fund those needs.

Armed with this information, the City Council proposed two ballot measures in 2004, aimed at raising the tourist tax by 2.5%. The first proposal allocated a percentage of the money raised specifically to public safety. That measure fell just short of the required 2/3rd vote. In the fall of that year, we tried again with a measure that did not earmark funds for public safety, requiring only a simple majority of votes to pass. That measure also failed.

Undeterred, the Council committed itself to increase funding for the Fire-Rescue department by almost \$57 million between 2004 and 2008, an increase of 46%. This allowed us to hire 44 additional personnel, acquire 16 new fire vehicles and operate a fire helicopter. This year we will consider the mayor's request to add a second helicopter. Both would be operational 24 hours a day, which makes a tremendous difference in the early hours of a wildfire.

We also expanded the City's brush management program and building codes, adding additional code enforcement and brush management personnel, requiring fire-resistant building materials in new homes, and increasing requirements for brush thinning around structures. This year, the California Coastal Commission will consider the final piece of the legislation passed by the Council in 2004 – a comprehensive brush management policy for the Coastal Zone. This will include the use of goats to thin brush in inaccessible areas, such as the steep slopes of Mount Soledad.

Last year, I asked our Independent Budget Analyst, Andrea Tevlin, to prepare an overview of what it would cost to implement and fund the Fire-Rescue Department's Station Master Plan, which calls for the construction and staffing of 20 additional stations across the city. That estimate should include cost estimates for land acquisition, design and construction, and adequate staffing, including pension and healthcare costs.

Her review will also include suggestions for how to pay for those stations, including the possibility of a tax increase or bond measure. These ideas should come as no surprise. Every review of fire protection and response requested by the City states that the city must increase revenues to provide appropriate levels of service.

This year, the Council created a new ad hoc committee, aimed specifically at reviewing our fire prevention and response policies. I sit on that committee, along with Council President Pro Tem Jim Madaffer and committee chair, Councilmember Brian Maienschein, both battle-tested veterans of local wildfires.

Later this year, the San Diego Fire-Rescue Department will present its review of the 2007 wildfires to the Fire Committee, identifying what worked, what policies and strategies need to be revised, and gaps in service, equipment and personnel that need to be filled. Based on the information and recommendations of all of the groups I've described here, we can determine the best way to fund these needs. This will be one of the most important conversations we can hold as a community. I hope you will join us.